PH.D. CANDIDATE GONCU BERK FINDS PERFECT FIT AT U OF M

By Suzy Frisch

Gozde Goncu Berk was earning her Ph.D. in industrial design from one of Turkey’s most prestigious universities, but her heart really was in fashion. She started looking for an apparel program where design was at the heart of the curriculum, and she found the University of Minnesota.

Berk left Istanbul to start her Ph.D. at the University, impressed with the apparel design program and that it is located within the College of Design. She found a perfect fit at Minnesota, with its emphasis on the process and intention behind apparel design, as well as the social science aspects of fit and fashion.

One big exception to that good fit: the state’s brutally cold weather. Berk admits to having a bit of culture shock when she arrived in Minnesota in January 2008. She was used to the bustling streets of Istanbul, a city of nearly 13 million people where residents constantly walk from place to place. So it took Berk awhile to get accustomed to the car-focused culture of the Twin Cities, especially in the middle of winter.

Fortunately Berk now feels right at home at the University. She is a teaching and research assistant and is focusing her research on the development of world fashion, including the role of design in building businesses, industries, and cities.

Berk has a bachelor’s degree in industrial design and a master’s in fashion design from Istanbul Technical University (ITU), where she was pursuing her Ph.D. in industrial design. After completing her Ph.D. from Minnesota, she intends to return to Turkey to teach in both the fashion and industrial design departments at ITU. The product development process particularly engages her, as does designing jewelry and accessories.

In 2004, Berk served as a visiting scholar at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York. Based on that experience and her time at the U, she has noticed differences between American and Turkish design programs. In the U.S. there is more structure to the classes and students generally work on the same projects simultaneously, developing different approaches to a similar design problem. The design education in Turkey is centered on studio courses where students work at their own pace on individual projects one-on-one with professors.

She also has been struck by Minnesota’s research focus and how findings get applied to the design process; in Turkey, schools are more oriented to craftsmanship. When Berk returns to her country she plans to incorporate this structured design process and research focus into her classes.

“In Turkey our students are just used to learning things by doing, and I want to teach this process- and research-oriented way to our students,” Berk says. “Designers are used to expressing their thoughts visually, and here we also emphasize learning by writing and writing about our thinking. I think it’s very effective.”
Susan P. Ashdown’s connections to the University of Minnesota run deep. They stretch back to the early 1970s when she took coursework towards a master’s degree in theater arts, continued when she returned for her 1991 Ph.D. in apparel, and endure today as she conducts joint research projects with professors in Apparel Design.

Today, the Helen G. Canoyer Professor in the Department of Fiber Science and Apparel Design at Cornell University is genuinely grateful that she earned her doctorate at the U. Ashdown was greatly influenced by her graduate-level classes and the research she did with Associate Dean and Professor Marilyn DeLong on early custom-fit computer programs. The impact was deep enough, Ashdown says, that she ultimately shifted her emphasis from functional design to a broader focus on how technology impacts apparel design. She also specializes in sizing and fit.

Ashdown credits the overall breadth of the University of Minnesota curriculum—covering fiber science, design, the social science of dress, the history of apparel, and beyond—with preparing her well for a long career in teaching and research.

“It’s always been such a pleasure to say that my Ph.D. is from the University of Minnesota because that is highly regarded, both in my field and across the world,” said Ashdown. “I value that very highly. There are great, amazing people there.”

The sturdy links between Ashdown and U of M faculty have inspired many fruitful research endeavors. A current project, which is being funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, involves the College of Design’s Human Dimensioning Lab and motion analysis systems. Ashdown and U of M researchers designed a protective coverall for agricultural workers who handle pesticides; they are about to begin testing the new coveralls and have filed for a joint patent. Next, the Minnesota and Cornell researchers are planning a project to make firefighters’ uniforms more functional and comfortable.

Collaborating on research from across the country isn’t always easy. But it helps that Ashdown has close relationships with several faculty members, some dating back to their graduate school days. The team makes it work by holding meetings via videoconference and getting together once a year. Another factor working in their favor is that Cornell and Minnesota have the same kind of body scanner.

By working together, “we can recruit subjects and scan them using the same protocol, so we get twice as much data in half the time,” Ashdown says. “But the real advantage is when we meet in person once a year and talk about the research. The more creative people you have together talking about a project the better the project is.”

In addition to her love of functional design, Ashdown is equally passionate about teaching. She enjoys interacting with students and feeding off of their creative thinking; she believes she became an effective teacher as a graduate student at Minnesota. It’s just another reason for Ashdown to treasure her long and rich history with the Apparel Design program at the University.

**WHAT IF WE COULD HELP TEENS BELIEVE THAT ALL BODIES ARE BEAUTIFUL?**

Researchers in the Human Dimensioning Lab are working with U of M psychiatrists in the Academic Health Center to develop an educational tool that will let teens view a whole range of real people/real bodies in 3D demonstrating that we do, indeed, come in “all shapes and sizes.”
The prologue to the story of the clothing line Calpurnia Peach features two Midwestern apparel design students whirling through New York City during their junior fall semester, where they complete multiple internships in apparel design studios, take 16 credits, work in sales at Henri Bendel, and form a design alliance based on their mutual interest in screen printing. Back in the Twin Cities, they take the “Voltage: Fashion Amplified” runway show at First Avenue by storm—twice—and start their own clothing design company, all before graduating from the University of Minnesota in May 2009.

While the design partnership of business partners and ‘09 grads Luci Kandler and Ashley Wokasch has a storybook quality, both acknowledge that the development of Calpurnia Peach, their burgeoning screen printing-based apparel line, owes much to their adeptness in the technical aspects of constructing apparel. Their self-assured skills of draping, pattern making, construction, and finishing, developed during hundreds of studio hours at McNeal Hall, allow them to fluidly execute their highly imaginative design ideas.

The Apparel Design program calls its approach the “integrated studio,” where instructors balance helping students achieve technical expertise with teaching them a creative design process for developing their ideas. The success of this integrated approach was evident in Kandler’s and Wokasch’s senior lines, presented in the annual apparel design fashion show in February, held in Rapson Hall. Both women’s lines were inspired by the story of Peter Pan. The designs were youthful and fun, but not childish costumes—a sophisticated execution of a novel idea.

The Calpurnia Peach business plan originated as a senior capstone project for Kandler’s honors program, advised by Professor Missy Bye. The line features custom screen-printed women’s apparel that is current but not trendy, aimed at the woman who is individualistic, youthful, and appreciates hand-made clothing.

The breakneck pace at which Kandler and Wokasch work and flourish continues this year. During summer 2009 they completed three workshops for the Walker Art Center, teaching children and adults screenprinting on fabric. In September, they participated in the annual MN Fashion Week and their designs appeared on the runway of Minneapolis’ Varsity Theater multi-media event, Wanderlust. Commissions from individual customers are ongoing. Having recently set up a design studio, Kandler and Wokasch will next focus on how to increase production while retaining the hand-made characteristics and high quality of Calpurnia Peach designs. Committed to remaining in the vibrant and supportive Twin Cities art and design community, they will bring their creativity to the search for new ways of building brand awareness for their business.

Above: Wokasch and Kandler's designs for 2009 senior show, inspired by the character of Wendy from Peter Pan.
Wayne Laberda (BS ’05 Apparel Design), a designer of junior’s shorts, pants, and shirts and women’s outerwear for Target’s Merona brand, volunteers for the Apparel Design Mentor Program to “offer a helping hand,” but sees mentoring as a two-way street: “Students have their ears to the ground, and may tell me about design influences that I haven’t registered yet.”

For the last 10 years, each senior apparel design student has been paired with an apparel design professional. From these mentors, students obtain input for their senior line, a group of thematically related garments presented at a spring runway show. Mentoring also helps students sharpen their communication skills, introduces them to networking, and usually gets them inside a working design studio.

Avid interests in art and design have been continuous threads for Laberda since high school, where he taught himself to sew and alter patterns, made theatre costumes, and learned drafting at an architectural firm. There he realized his gift for drawing or drafting in two dimensions but imagining the final product (a house, a dress) as a three-dimensional form.

Laberda’s relationship with mentees is purposely free-form. In addition to help with concept research and detailed critiques of the student’s senior line, his assistance may include advice on portfolio development, Web site development, or extra-curricular fashion show participation. A tour of the Target design studio is part of the package. A special skill of Laberda’s is helping a mentee get past a designing “block” via an intensive brainstorming session.

As a successful professional designer who generously serves as a mentor, Laberda’s insightful advice (see box below) is as grounded as Laberda himself. The Apparel Design Mentorship Program benefits immeasurably from the vibrant and giving Twin Cities design community.

MENTOR PROGRAM USES THE BEST DESIGN PROFESSIONALS HAVE TO OFFER: THE BENEFIT OF THEIR EXPERIENCE

By Kathleen Campbell

Wayne Laberda with a friend on a recent work trip to Korea

VOICE OF THE MENTOR: WAYNE LABERDA’S ADVICE TO YOUNG DESIGNERS

- Don’t get married to your projects or your designs. On the job, someone will ask you to stop what you’re doing and focus elsewhere. Most of your designs will not be selected for production.

- Tolerate ambiguity. Keep moving forward, even if you don’t know where you are going. Trust the design process.

- A direct connection from your head to your hand is essential. Know how to sketch a garment, draft it on the computer, and build it. Yes, you must know construction.

- Learn to take criticism. It’s part of being a designer.

- Seek out team projects and become a flexible, dynamic team member. Very few designers work alone.
APPAREL DESIGN PROGRAM FACULTY

Elizabeth (Missy) Bye
Marilyn DeLong
Lucy Dunne
Sherri Gahring
Karen LaBat

The Apparel Design program is focused on creating privately funded scholarship funds to help students meet the rising costs of higher education. The University is offering a rare opportunity to double the impact of gifts through the Promise of Tomorrow Scholarship drive. Gifts of $25,000 or more are used to create an endowment fund at the University of Minnesota Foundation and the payout from the fund is matched by the University, thereby doubling the impact of the gift. A group of apparel design alumni is currently meeting to lay a plan for developing at least one of these matching scholarships. Alumni and friends can help by making gifts directed to scholarships for apparel design students that can then be added to this endowment.

For more information, contact Sue Danielson Bretheim, at 612-624-1386, or visit the U of M Foundation’s website at www.giving.umn.edu.